

Vermont Payment for Ecosystem Services and Soil Health Working Group

Summary of Meeting #33: Tuesday, December 13, 2022

More detailed information, including any presentation slides and the meeting recording can be found at <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/pes>.

Introduction

The Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and Soil Health Working Group held its thirty-third meeting on Tuesday, December 13, 2022, via Zoom. The objectives of the meeting were to update the full Working Group on pilot development and progress related to drafting the final report.

Summary of discussion

First, Ryan Patch (VAAFM) updated the Working Group on the work of the pilot development subtask group.

He outlined that the NRCS CSP with Vermont State Enhancement pilot approach would focus on paying for meeting thresholds, rather than paying for units of ecosystem services. He further highlighted work done by VAAFM which shows that outputs from NRCS's CART planning tool (which is used for CSP evaluations) are fairly congruent with a process-based model (APEX) for specific thresholds. Working Group members highlighted the importance of being clear about data protections and data sharing requirements.

Working Group members also agreed that the pilot program should –

1. Focus on paying for meeting thresholds, rather than units;
2. Combine annual state payments for year 2 on into one lump sum (though CSP clients will continue to receive annual federal payments);
3. Not target any particular resource concerns but give farmers flexibility to choose among the existing NRCS state and nationwide resource concern prioritization framework for CSP; and
4. Include a review at the end of year 1 to assess program success and any lessons learned for future phases.

Working Group members also highlighted the need for clear talking points on the value of the pilot, including that landowners receive an assessment summarizing their existing stewardship levels and work with planners to maintain those levels and incorporate additional practices. They further noted that the pilot framework should include details of the “off-ramp” for farmers who do not end up qualifying for CSP and other more suitable programs that planners would direct them to.

Afterward, CBI facilitators updated the Working Group on report drafting progress. Working Group members received an initial draft of the report on December 12. They will be asked to share any input by December 23, which will be compiled and shared back with them. The Working Group will also meet on January 3 to go over the input received. Working Group members also recommended that voices of all members be included in the final report and encouraged members to share any disagreements ahead of time so that they can be incorporated in the report.

Comments from members of public included:

- A recommendation that farmer Working Group members submit a response to the final report
- A recommendation to embed data protection in the report by highlighting that the Working Group is a public process and that there are concerns around data protection given parallel developments of private markets
- Recognition that many farmers are also forest managers and that forest management should be included in the Working Group's pilot

The meeting was adjourned at 2 PM.

Links shared

1. [Meeting recording](#)
2. [PES technical reports](#), UVM
3. ["The Defense of Nature: Resisting the Financialization of the Earth"](#), Foster